

# **By the Water**

Archaeological Perspectives  
on Human Strategies around the Baltic Sea

*Edited by*

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Södertörn Academic Studies 17

2003

**By Lodia and Troika**

Early Russian Travellers' Accounts

1), 2)

*by Rune Edberg*

"Why look you pale?  
Seasick I think, coming from Muscovy"  
(Shakespeare: "Love's Labour's Lost")

### **Introduction**

Archaeological and historical source material bears witness to the lively cultural links in existence across the Baltic during the Viking period and early Middle Ages. Parallels with the ravages of the Scandinavians and their attempts at colonisation in Western Europe at the same period present themselves immediately, even if the circumstances are not entirely comparable.

In my research I have concentrated on questions and problems touching on the conditions and prerequisites necessary for these Viking expeditions. Critical study of the sources combined with experimental journeys using reconstructions of Viking-period boats have thrown new light on the subject and made it possible to re-examine certain older research viewpoints (Edberg 1999a, b including references).

Since, however, the material which explicitly witnesses to the conditions which Viking-period travellers encountered is very thin, it is also of the greatest importance to study analogies and comparative material. Late - historical - travel accounts from pre-industrial Russia have here proved themselves to be a possible source.

From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a number of different reports, letters and descriptions exist, written by Western and Central Europeans who travelled to different parts of Russia and the East

and wrote down their observations and impressions (survey in Arne 1944; cf. Latvakangas 1995). Some examples of this literature are presented in this paper, where I have particularly taken note of information from the different authors as to selection of route, means of transport and time taken for the journey under summer and winter conditions respectively.

An important reason for concentrating particularly on such questions is that a background can be obtained for serious discussion on the prerequisites for Scandinavian long-distance journeys, for instance to Kiev, Bulgar and Constantinople (cf. Edberg 1999b). Since the sources are by no means always as clear as one would wish, the quantitative information from which I have taken excerpts should, as a rule, be accepted with a certain margin for variability. I have also extracted from the travel reports a number of descriptions of interest in terms of environment and events.

The relevance of the material from a general point of view, in relation to the expeditions of the Viking period, is discussed in my conclusions.

### **A Habsburg ambassador's travels in the early 16th century**

Sigmund von Herberstein travelled in Russia between 1517 and 1518 and between 1526 and 1527 in his capacity as Habsburg emissary. His account was published for the first time in 1549, in Latin, and entitled *Rerum muscoviticarum commentarii*. It was rapidly translated into many languages and during the centuries immediately following came out in a large number of editions. It is regarded as having had an immeasurable influence on the European image of Russia (Herberstein 1969).

This work partly contains general political, geographical and cultural history descriptions of Russia, partly - and in this context most interestingly - a whole lot of impressions and information on the stretches of river Herberstein

himself journeyed along, embracing the Volga, Don and Dnieper river systems. He also describes travels by land, under both summer and winter road conditions. On the other hand Herberstein has no information which makes it possible, in tangible terms, to calculate his own travelling times. He does, however, mention that in Russia 30 versts are as a rule regarded as a day's journey. 3)

As far as the Volga Basin is concerned Herberstein notes that logs are driven on the River Moskva down to the town of the same name and that this river downstream from the town is navigable in both directions. But travels take a long time because of all the loops in the river, especially between Moscow and Kolomna, a stretch of 270 versts (as the crow flies, the distance between these two towns is only some 100 km). Herberstein reports that travellers from Moscow who wish to go to Nizhniy Novgorod or farther down the Volga prefer, therefore, not to embark ship until they are downstream from Vladimir, where one can sail along the Klyazma and Oka to Murom. As to the river system of the Don, Herberstein recounts how merchants who intend to travel from Moscow to the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea first of all follow the road to Ryazan. They then reach the river at Dankov, 24 German miles from Moscow, and from there travel by ship down to Azov and on to Kaffa and Constantinople. The ships are often loaded in the autumn if the summer has been wet, since the Don is not always sufficiently deep at other times of the year, he notes. From Dankov it is at least 20 days' journey to Azov (the river stretch is approx. 1 300 km). Moreover the Don by no means runs up into the Riphey Mountains but into Lake Ivanozero, writes Herberstein, thereby correcting the information given by Classical writers.

According to Herberstein the Dnieper is navigable immediately after joining the Dnieperez, near Dneprovo, and it is there the shipping usually takes cargoes on board. One year, he reports, the river at Smolensk was full to the brim with water during the melting of the snows after Easter and the forests

were flooded. Ships plying to and from Smolensk were loaded and unloaded in Vyazma. Herberstein sent the baggage on ahead with the riverboat while he himself preferred to ride a horse.

Water, however, not only unites. The town of Perm is easy to reach in winter but practically inaccessible during the summer because of all the bogs and rivers. He who wishes to travel there at this season, writes Herberstein, must of necessity take the long way round northwards via Vologda, Ustyug and Visyoga. Boats, though, are not the only form of traditional transport in the kingdom of the czar. Herberstein writes, for example, that the Mordvinians, whom he defines as a hardy folk living on game and honey, are skillful bowmen and have many fine furs, and make long journeys on foot to sell their merchandise in the Tartar areas.

Long-distance winter journeys also appear to be common with Herberstein. He recounts that he himself once journeyed on or along the frozen Western Dvina by sledges over 12 German miles upstream to Polotsk. At one place there was open water from shore to shore, apart from a passage no wider than to give room for a sledge to manoeuvre. The company succeeded in getting through, though with their hearts in their mouths. Herberstein had, moreover, also travelled in his own sledge earlier on the whole way from Augsburg to Novgorod.

On another occasion Herberstein rode with his party all the way from Novgorod to Moscow. In order to cross some of the rivers, such as the Konskaya and Molochnya, they were forced to make primitive rafts of branches, cut in the forest.

Herberstein also recounts that a trustworthy man told him that once, when he was sent from Moscow to Beloozero, he rode on horseback till he reached the Volga, and from there was able to continue the rest of the stretch by sledge on a fine, even winter route.

## **1556: A river expedition from the White Sea to Novgorod**

In 1556 the two English merchants and explorers ("merchant adventurers"), Thomas Southam and John Sparke, found a water route between the White Sea and Novgorod, and Southam gave a detailed description of the journey to his employers, the Moscow Company. The report is especially interesting since it is one of the few existing descriptions which deals, in a reasonable amount of detail, with the portages places in the region (Morgan & Coote 1886).

The expedition started on 20th July 1556, in Kholmogory, a trading place by the Northern Dvina, with a hired ship the capacity of which was some 25 tons. Southam calls this ship "lodia or barke". The crew comprised six seamen and a boy. After 50 versts the travellers reached the Monastery of St. Michael, the site of present-day Archangel. The voyage then continued westwards along the White Sea coast and after many forays on shore and dangerous incidents the voyagers reached the mouth of the River Vyg on 2nd August. At Soroka (near the present-day town of Belomorsk) the Englishmen left their lodya and hired three "small boates", which are not described in any further detail but cannot have been large since they were manned by a total of 12 oarsmen, probably 4 per boat. Thus began their river voyage through Northwestern Russia. Already after 4 versts they came upon the first waterfalls, which the expedition was forced to pass to landward:

"We went this day 7 miles to a place called Ostroue where we lay all night, but in the way, 4 miles from Soroka at a place where the water falleth from the rockes, as if it came steepe downe from a mountain, we were constrained to take out our goods and wares out of the said boats, and caused them to be carried a mile ouer land, & afterwards also had our boats in the sort carried or drawn ouer land by force of men which there dwelled, being tenants to the monasterie aforesaid. And when our boates were come to the place where our wares were laied, wee launched our boats and laded our wares againe, and went to the

place before named, where wee continued and remained that night".

The monastery to which Southam refers is the well-known Solovki Convent on the Solovets islands in the White Sea. What is more, the Solovki monks had assuredly equipped the travellers with a letter of safe conduct and a guide, "a seruant of theirs to conduct vs safely through the dangerous riuer of Owiga" (Vyg). The message was directed to the all the dependants of the monastery, asking that they should be prepared to assist the travellers in all dangerous places and also carry their goods and boats as and when necessary.

It is impossible to say, from the report, whether the dependants of the monastery regularly assisted with this kind of boat transport or were drummed up just for the sake of the Englishmen. Since the journey was along a route which, in any case, had not been used previously for regular long-distance traffic, the latter alternative is the most probable.

The next day they rowed a further 5 versts up the river, whereupon they were forced once more to travel overland with their wares and boats, this time a longer stretch, 3 versts. It is not expressly evident whether the boat crew obtained any assistance from the local population, but by all accounts this was the case this time, as on later similar occasions. This stage of the journey that day totalled only 7 versts.

On the third day they managed to row without any problems and covered a total of 30 versts, but the following day there were fresh hardships:

"We departed from Paranda at 5 of the clocke in the morning, and all that day, what with setting and drawing our boats, we went but 11 miles, for we twice vnloaded our wares and drew our boats ouerland, in one place a mile & an halfe, in an other place as it were the eighth part of a mile, and so we came to a place called Voiyets where we taried all that night."

After a journey of a further 25 versts the village of Koykanitsa was reached, where the guide, provided for the Englishmen by the monks of Solovki, returned home together with the boatmen from Soroka. But before the guide left he arranged new boats and new oarsmen for Southam and his companion.

The following day a fine stage of the route lay ahead of them and all of 60 versts were covered. The next day, however, the goods and boats were carried overland for 3 versts and the day's distance was a moderate total of 13 versts. After a further stretch of rowing the following day they sent for riding and packhorses from a nearby town, Pouensa (Povenets), one verst from Lake Onega. Southam and Sparke thereafter passed the watershed between the outflow basin of the Northern Dvina and Lake Onega in the saddle.

In Povenets the Englishmen hired two new boats but in Tolvinskiy, on the western shore of Onega, they abandoned these and bought a new, obviously larger and more suitable means of transport. This is unfortunately not described in detail, but it is apparent that it was rigged with masts and sails. No further exchanges of boats were needed after this for the remainder of the journey, which now continued at a good pace. Onega was crossed in a day with the aid of advantageous winds, while the downstream journey to Svir took two days. The rest of the journey across Lake Ladoga and up the Volkhov was completed in a further six days.

Our travellers arrived in Novgorod on 30th August and handed over the wares they had brought with them from Kholmogory to the Moscow Company agent. They had not succeeded in selling anything along the way, but Southam excuses himself by saying, "...the people of the countrey euery where be so miserable..."



Southam's and Sparke's adventure had taken a total of 41 days and they had, according to their own calculations, covered a total of 1 261 versts (approx. 1,345 km), whereof 936 versts (998 km) were covered on the rivers between Soroka and Novgorod. The average 24-hour distance for the whole journey was thereby approx. 33 km.

The portages, according to Southam's logbook, amounted to four, with a total length of 8 5/8 versts, approx. 10 km, plus the passage over the watershed, which can be reckoned as some 20 km.

Despite this successful journey, however, Southam finished his report in a minor key by rejecting the possibility of using the newly discovered river route for transports of goods between Onega and the White Sea. The waterfalls, he says, are too problematical, both in summer and winter:

"Here it is to be noted that from this place of Pouensa vnto the village of Soroka downe those dangerous riuers which we came through, at no time of the yeere can or may any man carrie or transport any goods that come from Nougorde, or the Narue (Narva), and such other places; for in the Sommer it is impossible to carie down any wares by reason of the great fals of water that doe descend from the rockes. Likewise in the Winter by reason of the great force and fall of waters, which make so terrible raises, that in those places it neuer freezeth, but all such wares as come fro Nougorde to Pouensa are transported by land to a place calles Some (present-day Sumskiy Posad) in the Winter, which Some standeth on the Seaside, as doth Soroka."

These transports, Southam emphasises, take place by sledge, and he explains that if goods are sent by boat from Novgorod to Pouensa after the ice has broken up they have to remain there till next winter, when they can be sent on by sledge to Some. It is apparent that sledge traffic on this route is extensive since Some delivers salt to Novgorod.

### **The 1550s and 1560s: A merchant travels on the Northern Dvina, Sukhona and Volga**

Anthony Jenkinson was an English merchant and member of the Moscow Company, who undertook several long journeys in Russia between 1557 and 1571. Jenkinson recounts in his journal a whole lot of information about river traffic, as well as on-the-spot accounts (Morgan & Coote 1886; cf. Harrison 1999).

Jenkinson also includes an account of a journey he undertook from the White Sea, up the Northern Dvina. He came first to Ustyug, the old trading outpost of Novgorod in the north east, located at the confluence of the Dvina's tributaries, the Yug and the Sukhona. The journey then continued on up the Sukhona. At the town of Totma the river becomes shallow and stony and difficult of access for the local types of boats, "nassades" and "dosneckes". These craft ply, according to Jenkinson, in the river traffic between Kholmogory and Vologda, near the source of the Sukhona. These "nassades" he described as follows:

"...very long builded, broade made and close aboue, flatte bottomed, and drawing aboue foure foote water, and will carrie two hundred tunnes: they have no yron appertaining to them but all of timber, And when the winde serueth, they are made to sayle. Otherwise, they have many men, som to hale and drawe by the neckes with long small ropes made fast to the saide boates, and some set with long poles."

The Vologda merchants mainly carry salt in these ships, writes Jenkinson, who had himself towed upstream from Kholmogory to Vologda, a stretch of some 1 050 km. It took 26 days and nights, which makes an average of approx. 40 km.

After completing his business in Vologda Jenkinson continued towards Moscow. It was now 1st December, and he travelled by sledge ("as the maner is in winter") via Yaroslavl and Rostov. He arrived, after five days of rapid travel, on 6th December. This distance has been measured along the roads of today and totals 462 km. Thus calculated the Englishman

achieved approx. 77 km per day. He noted that there were 14 post-houses along the route but he had passed most of them without stopping to find lodging.

In 1558 Jenkinson travelled from Moscow to the Caspian Sea by river. What his craft looked like is not apparent, but the expedition started on 23rd April and went via Moscow and the Oka out to the Volga at Nizhniy Novgorod, which was reached on 11th May. In Nizhniy Jenkinson met an officer who had 500 boats under his command, and these were fully loaded - partly with soldiers, ammunition and provisions, and partly with trading goods, all destined for Astrakhan at the mouth of the Volga, which had recently been conquered by the czar. The day of departure was 19th May and on 25th they arrived in Kazan, another place recently taken over by Moscow. There they remained until 13th June. On 6th July they passed a place called Perevollog, where the distance between the Volga and the Don is shortest, approx. 15 km, the place name being connected, notes Jenkinson, with the fact that the Tatars there carried their boats between the rivers. On 14th July, after 73 days' travelling, they reached journey's end.

The following year Jenkinson travelled back the same way. He left Astrakhan on 10th June together with a Tatar embassy, escorted by 100 of the czar's soldiers. They reached Kazan on 28th July, after six weeks. On 7th August the journey continued, but at Murom by the Oka they chose the land route, and finally arrived in Moscow on 2nd September, 74 days after they had started.

The distance by river between Moscow and Astrakhan is some 2,300 km, which means that the Englishman averaged roughly 30 km per 24 hours.

### **1610-1620: Dutch peacemakers on the Swedish Eastern front**

On 25th August 1615 a Dutch embassy left The Hague in order to travel to the Novgorod area and mediate between Sweden and Russia.

Anthonis Goeteeris headed the embassy. His travel journal shows him to be a very careful observer. When it was eventually published it included a number of copper engravings, executed according to the author's sketches (Hildebrand 1917).

The Dutchmen left their ships in Reval and set off on 18th September on horseback and by coach to Narva, a journey of five days, and on 11th October the company sent their baggage and some servants on ahead by boat to Yama. The actual embassy provided itself with riding horses and "a travelling coach with good carriage horses" and started the following day. On 16th the baggage had arrived in Yama and the journey continued, now accompanied by a (Swedish) protective military escort. The landscape consisted characteristically of morasses and swampy forest and the road conditions were miserable. The wooden log causeways laid down along long stretches of the route, which went across bogs via Vruda, Starits and Tessau, were for the most part rotten to the core. In places they were a threat both to life and limb for both people and wagons, though even more dangerous for the horses. Cossacks and bands of robbers swarmed around the neighbourhood, and crossing a river was often extremely risky. As Goeteeris notes with a sigh:

"The fortress of Tessau is situated by a large river. Over this went a raft bridge of logs only tied together with bast rope, making it very dangerous to cross over it."

Novgorod was reached on 25th October after a journey of some 240 km from Narva, the daily stages being calculated as some 17 km.

In Novgorod they waited for the freezing of the ice, which this particular year was very early, in order to continue their journey. On 12th November the Volkhov was already "frozen solid" and they set off. Now the travelling party comprised a total of 150 one-horse sledges drawn by coach horses, plus military protection in the form of cavalry and infantry. But their problems began immediately. On

reaching the southern end of Lake Ilmen they took the wrong river and were forced to turn back and spend the night in the forest. Then the ice broke under a number of riders and sledges. Everything, which had fallen into the water, was saved, but their store of linen and clothes was ruined.

It was not until next day that they found the right river and reached Staraya Russa, the next stage of the journey, where they rested up. After this they followed the Pola and encountered yet more serious incidents with sledges going through the ice and the diplomats almost drowning. On 19th November they reached Milagona, eight German miles from Staraya Russa, where the embassy was accommodated in conditions of extreme primitiveness. The village lay near the headquarters of the Swedish military commander, Jakob de la Gardie. The distance between Novgorod and Milagona was some 120 km. It had taken all of 8 days and nights to get there, at an average rate of some 15 km per 24 hours. On 17th December the Dutchmen moved to another village, Glebova, which in its turn lay eight German miles from Milagona.

A member of the embassy, Andries van Wouw, left the negotiations early in order to travel as courier to Åbo, where King Gustavus Adolphus was resided at the time. Taking only four companions and nine sledges he travelled on 18th February from Glebova, and on the 25th reached the coastal settlement of Haruwel, continuing immediately over the frozen Gulf of Finland. On the 28th he arrived in Viborg. The distance can be reckoned as some 470 km and van Wouw had thereby travelled on average at a rate of 47 km per 24 hours.

The journey home for Goeteeris and the other members of the embassy took place the following month. On 17th March they left Novgorod in sledges with 60 cavalrymen to protect them and arrived in Narva, via Tessau and Yama, on the 22nd. The return journey was much more comfortable than the journey out. "Our route had once more gone over the above-mentioned wooden log causeways which now lay concealed under

hard-frozen snow. Since this filled all the uneven hollows it was now less difficult to get across," writes Goeteeris.

The journey of some 240 km had taken 5 days, an average of 48 km per day. The journey out, however, which was undertaken the previous autumn along the same route but under snowless conditions, took almost three times as long, i.e. 14 days.

### **The 1630s: the Holstein envoy on adventures on the Volkhov and the Volga**

Adam Olearius was a diplomatic envoy from the Duke of Holstein. His description is based on his own direct experiences from three embassies between 1633 and 1636. It covers an area from Lübeck by the Baltic to Astrakhan by the Caspian Sea. His travel descriptions are much more detailed than, for example, Herberstein's, whom he nevertheless sometimes falls back on (Olearius 1967).

Olearius' embassy sailed initially from Lübeck to Riga, where they waited for suitable sledging conditions. On 14th December 1633 they set off from there with sledges drawn by horses, and on the 23rd they reached Dorpat, where they celebrated Christmas. On the 29th they continued to Narva where they arrived on 3rd January.

There was then a delay for a good while for political reasons before the embassy was once again able to travel, and it was not until 28th May that they started off by the landward route towards Nyen, where they arrived on 1st June. The following day they continued to Nöteborg, where they were forced to delay until 20th July, when they were able to depart and continue to the border post of Laba. Olearius' embassy crossed Lake Ladoga and arrived on 23rd June at Staraya Ladoga. Seven versts upstream along the Volkhov they came upon rapids, and a further seven versts later yet more rapids, through which it was very dangerous to pass by boat. Olearius is the first to describe these rapids and how one navigated past them. At the rapids the river shoots forward like an

arrow over and between great blocks of stone, he notes. When the company reached the first rapid they all disembarked from the ships and waited whilst these were hauled with ropes by a hundred men past the most dangerous places. All the boats came through successfully except for the last one, where the rope broke and the boat went backwards. Fortunately, though, the stump of the rope wedged itself fast in the rapids and the boat could be rescued. We are told by Olearius that a bishop had recently lost his life there and a cargo of fish had been lost at the same spot.

When the rapids had happily been passed Olearius' company became acquainted with another torture: mosquitoes. We could neither travel in peace during the day nor sleep at night, he complains. But it emerges that they sailed even so or perhaps just therefore, for all the canvas were worth, and arrived in Novgorod on 28th June. The distance from Staraya Ladoga to Novgorod is about 210 km - Olearius therefore covered on average approx. 35 km per day on this stage of the journey.

On 1st August Olearius' party, whose baggage filled 50 coaches, continued from Novgorod along the land route to Moscow. The road went via Krannye Stanki, Kresty, Yazyelbitsy, Zimgorye, Volochek, Kolomna, Budovo, Torzhok and finally to Tver (where they were ferried over the Volga). They arrived on 14th August, having made frequent use of the coach stations along the way. Reckoned according to today's road distance Olearius travelled this stretch at a rate of roughly 37 km per day.

On 30th June the following year Olearius' party journeyed by boat from Moscow. Their destination was Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga in the Caspian Sea. On the first day of their journey they rowed in different shifts with the current and by the evening of 1st July had reached the village of Martyuk and thereby completed all of 120 versts, a very good start.

On 2nd July they met several large boats laden with honey, salt and salted fish, which were on their way from Astrakhan and destined for Moscow. The river was full of meanders and the river route was 36 German miles to Kolomna, which - Olearius comments - lies only 18 miles away if one travels in the winter the direct way by sledge. The journey continued to the Oka and they reached Pereyaslavl on 4th July, 107 versts from Kolomna, where the obliging townspeople took down parts of the river bridge to enable the embassy's boat to get through!

On 5th June they passed Ryazan and on 9th July Murom, where the company was shot at by the Tatars. On the 11th they reached Nizhniy Novgorod, where a newly built 120-foot-long, three-masted, flat-bottomed ship called the Friedrich, with 24 places for oarsmen, awaited them to continue the journey. She was built of pine especially for the voyage along the Volga, and had a draught of only 7 feet, since the river was full of hidden sandbanks and shallows. The ship was also armed and ready to hold robbers at a distance. River pilots, too, were taken on board.

According to Olearius, ships to Astrakhan usually set off for Nizhniy Novgorod in May or June, when the water level was high and it was possible not only to sail over the shallows but also to pass over the many low islands to be found in the Volga. Sometimes, though, one could get stuck even so, since the water level sinks quickly at night. Olearius saw ships that had been wrecked on the sandbanks in several places along the river.

The embassy did not depart from Nizhniy Novgorod until 30th July when the water level, which had sunk alarmingly quickly, was already troublesomely low. They got properly stuck on the very first day and had to warp themselves loose with the aid of a mooring cable. During the first four days they only managed to cover a total of two German miles and everyone was despondent since there were still, of course, hundreds of miles to go!



The following day they met a ship with 200 workmen aboard which came from Astrakhan, and this gave Olearius a chance to study their technique on an upstream voyage. If the wind is not directly following the Russians row out with the anchor and warp the ship towards the current. By this means they can cover 2 German miles a day. These boats are flat-bottomed, can load 400-500 "lasts of freight", and mainly carry salt, caviar and fish, he reports.

On 5th August they reached Vasilgorod, 120 versts from Nizhniy Novgorod. On 10th August they achieved only half a mile because of all the shallows. - Pull! Row! Back! Was heard all day long, recounts Olearius. On the 13th they reached Kazan after having repeatedly warped past many of the shallows. On the 17th they reached the confluence with the Kama and that same day Olearius' embassy came upon the Voivode of Terek with eight boats, travelling upstream to Moscow. On the 18th they then reached the outflow of the Utka, the river which comes from the direction of Bulgar, and Olearius complains:

"During this time, as throughout the journey, the shallows and the winds have to a great extent hindered our voyage. When we had a kind wind we went aground and when we got into a deep and comfortable channel, the wind was against us."

The company went ashore in the village of Krasnodemyansk, where the population made a living by building log boats and coffins and preparing lime bast. The raw material was available in the local deciduous forests and the products were sold far and wide. On 14th August they were in Kazan, where they met the Persian and Circassian caravans that had left Moscow a number of days before the boat travellers. The trading caravans, escorted by streltsy, travelled twice a year from Nizhniy Novgorod to Astrakhan according to Olearius' information.

After Kazan the Volga was very shallow and the Friedrich went aground time and again, losing many anchors in warping operations. On the 17th they

reached the inflow of the Kama - a river of the same breadth as the Weser according to the German traveller.

On 28th August they came to the Samara, 350 versts from Kazan, and now the river had become much more navigable. One day 115 versts were covered, on the journey from the Samara to the Cossack Mountains, and the 31st was even better with 120 versts. They met two barges on the same day owned by the Patriarch, and a large boat laden with caviar, owned by the Grand Prince. On each boat were 400 workmen to do the warping. Then they met four other barges laden with salt and fish, belonging to a merchant in Moscow. All these boats came from Astrakhan noted Olearius. On 1st September they met three large boats, the biggest of which had 300 lasts of goods on board and belonged to the Troitskiy Monastery.

On 6th September they arrived in Tsaritsin after many days of anxiety as to possible attacks from Cossacks. On the 15th of the same month, 78 days and nights after starting out, they reached their destination of Astrakhan. The stretch between Moscow and Astrakhan is roughly 2 300 km, making Olearius' average day's journey approx. 29 km.

Olearius also left a record of a wintry sleigh ride from Novgorod to Moscow. They started on 16th March and arrived the same evening at a point 4 German miles away in Bronnitsy. On 17th March they travelled on 65 versts to Krettsy, and on 18th March 10 German miles to Zimogorye. On 19th March they did a stretch of 50 versts and spent the night at Kolomna, and on 20th March they travelled 7 German miles to Vidroputsk. Each day they were supplied with fresh horses at the coach stations. The lack of snow, however, meant that along certain stretches they chose to travel on the ice-covered Volga and some of its tributaries with thin ice also had to be passed. On one such occasion they had to drive in piles downstream in one of the rivers so as not to risk the sledges being washed away. On 28th March, after 12 days' journey, the company arrived in Moscow. The

landward route from Novgorod to Moscow is today 525 km. Calculated according to this distance, the party covered approx. 44 km on average per day.

When he was to have an official audience Olearius was carried by sleigh "as is their custom when there is snow and frost," he comments:

"For thanks to the frozen ground and the wealth of snow over the whole of Russia and Livonia it is easy to travel in the low Russian sleighs, which are made of bast or lime bark... The Russians have small fast horses for travelling, they are used to a single feed and then trot eight, sometimes ten, and even up to twelve German miles a day, as I have witnessed when I travelled from Tver to Torzhok."

The 1670s: A Swedish intelligence officer in Russia With the Swedish embassy sent to Moscow in 1673 was also a fortification captain called Erich Palmquist. His assignment was to acquire as much information as possible on the communications situation and military conditions, since he was, quite simply, a military attaché and intelligence officer (Palmquist 1898: cf. Tarkiainen 1987, Kovalenko 1989, Attius Sohlman 1998). Palmquist was a pupil of the great Erik Dahlberg, and from him he had also learnt to draw and sketch. Palmquist gives an illustrated description of the embassy's journeys, depicting towns such as Novgorod, Tver and Moscow as well as a number of buildings, and particular events which took place along the way. Amongst other things he has a suggestive picture of the meeting between the Swedish embassy and the Russian delegation which came to meet it. The location is the redoubt of Moravna by the River Luga at the-then border between Sweden and Russia. In this volume there are also some of the Russian maps copied by Palmquist in Moscow, including one showing the reaches of the Volga between Nizhniy Novgorod and Astrakhan as well as one of Siberia.

Palmquist gives an account in the form of tables of the alternative land and lake routes between Narva, Nyen, Novgorod and Pskov. It emerges that the land

routes are prepared and maintained, and when the embassy travels between Novgorod and Torzhok it is expressly termed following the main road. Palmquist takes the opportunity to draw the Iverskiy Monastery out in Svetoozero, which they pass. The route Palmquist travelled was, in principle, the same stretch as today's main road between Novgorod and Moscow. He points out that one should have the Msta on the left the whole time and that many older maps are wrong in that respect.

From Palmquist's detailed drawings it is apparent that sledges of different types were a common kind of transport in winter. One picture, for example, shows distinguished ladies driving in sleigh stage-coaches, and at the above-named Russian-Swedish meeting at Moravena the parties parked their sleighs a little way on either side of the border.

In his introduction or commentary Palmquist makes certain generalisations drawn from his impressions. Point 6 says:

"As to the countryside it should be noted that it is mostly low, flat and fertile, whereout in there are many large morasses. The large wild forests and wildernesses are so well supplied with navigable currents, Rivers, Lakes and Water that the region can be said to be particularly well situated for trade."

In point 8 Palmquist notes that the Russian roads are only good and dry when they proceed through pine and spruce forests. For the rest they are swampy and deep, despite the fact that it would be easy to improve them. Palmquist even speculates on the idea that the authorities deliberately neglect the roads into the interior of the country in order to make it troublesome to travel there. Nor, he notes, is there a single bridge over the Volga despite the fact that everyone travelling to Moscow has to cross the river. Point 10 says, in a comment on the symbol system used for the Russian maps:

"That on the Charts the word Wolotch means a passage where one has to carry one's ships a little way from one Current to the other, so that even if the Currents do not have any Communication with each other, one is just as well in the habit of coming from the one to the other with small cargo boats and ships, which practice among the Russians is all the easier, since their lodias and struses are not troubled with iron equipment, as they are only fastened together with Bast, or sewn together, though just as tightly as planks were glued onto each other. And so that this fastning shall not be knocked or worn, the Bast is embedded in the planks themselves - and, moreover, driven in hard with tools and lastly coated several times with train oil."

Palmquist's description of "wolotch", i.e. volok, does not, however, add up properly with the description on his own maps. On the map, "Copy of a Chart which the Czar of Siberia ... (1668)...has had drawn up" Palmquist sketches several hundreds of kilometres long voloks in the Yenisey, Ob and Olonets river systems. Moreover this map illustrates, amongst other things, where the best areas for sable are to be found in this isolated part of the world. Between Novgorod and Moscow, however, the landward route also crosses the Valday Hills without Palmquist noting any connection with the voloks between the river systems which, according to older information, were to be found there.

### **The 1730s: A Swedish officer on a long-distance journey through Siberia**

Eighteenth century traveller Sven Waxell was a Swedish officer in Russian service who took part in the "Second Kamchatka expedition" of 1733-1742 led by Vitus Bering (Waxell 1953).

The expedition started from St. Petersburg, and during the journey out to the farthest coast of Siberia, which took an amazingly long eight years, they travelled alternately by land and water. When they arrived at a new navigable river after a long landward stretch they regularly built boats and

travelled in them. This is what happened, for example at Yeniseysk by the Yenisey and Ust-Kut by the Lena. Waxell also mentions that during their journey through Siberia they often travelled in sledges, which they built on the spot. The journey from the River Ilim to Ust-Kut, for example, was undertaken in such sledges. There was a shortage of horses, however, and the men who followed the expedition, many of whom were forcibly recruited prisoners, had themselves to be harnessed for the job. Farther east, and at Kamchatka, they took up the local custom of using dog teams.

When at long last the expedition began to approach Okhotsk by the Pacific Ocean they tried, in order to win time, to send materials and necessaries on the River Urak, which had never previously been used as a route because of its rapids and fast-flowing waters. Their experiences, however, were striking. It proved to be an excellent plan to travel on the river both at spring high water and after heavy rain in the summer. They built boats, which could take 150 or 200 puds of cargo (2,400 -3,600 kg), since larger than this was impracticable.

"It was not advantageous to build larger ships for sailing on this river, and yet the voyage on the Urak, even with excellent ships, is rather dangerous; this river has a frightfully fast course, many small rocks and large waterfalls."

Waxell himself travelled on two occasions along this actual stretch of the Urak, and calculated its length as being 30 German miles (225 km), and this tremendously quickly:

"But both times I did these journeys I was not on my way more than 17 hours and this was even so without all the various aids such as oars, sails and suchlike, it was exclusively the strong current which took me forwards. In all circumstances this river has been of incalculable use for our expedition, for we would have been able to take the entire amount which it was necessary to transport to Okhotsk only with

insurmountable difficulties on the direct route. The trouble we had setting up and using the transport route along the Urak was absolutely nothing in comparison with what the direct route would have cost us in wasted time etc."

The water level of the Urak was also tremendously changeable. When it rained the river burst its banks and so that the surrounding low-lying land lay under water, and this meant that the boats floated away far out into the forests. But as soon as the rain stopped the river was almost dry in many places after a couple of hours " and thereby all our chances of sail have evidently come to an end."

If the summer is particularly dry one can therefore risk losing a whole year's journeys, warned Waxell.

### **Some observations and conclusions**

The gap in time between the Westerners who reported on the Russia of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the Scandinavian voyagers of the Viking period is, of course, enormous. But methods of travel did not develop to any great extent during the intervening centuries. Travellers continued to be completely at the mercy of the weather and conditions of nature as well as having to rely on the mere muscle power of animals and men. An important difference, however, was the system of main roads with post-houses and coach stations, set up from the thirteenth century onwards. These staging places were called *iamy*, using a word which, like the actual phenomenon, was borrowed from the Tatars. They made travelling significantly easier, not least during the short, cold, winter days. But away from this road network the travellers were still forced to camp out in the open, often in very trying conditions. A technical innovation consisted in wagons with their harnessed teams of horses. But these, to judge from the sources, were used mostly for driving baggage, since travelling in wagons was extremely bumpy due to the terrible state of the roads. Riding was more comfortable, but many still testified to travels by land during the snow-free season being a great trial,

especially when low-lying, waterlogged terrain was to be passed.

In the winter snow, land in the grip of ground frost, and ice-covered waterways offered a good foundation for sledge journeys. It is significant that Goeteeris' and his companions got on at more than double the speed in March through the morass between Novgorod and Narva compared with the journey out along the same route in the October of the previous year, when the ground was free of ice and snow. In spite of the advantages of the winter surface conditions there was a great risk of falling through the ice, frost injuries and other accidents. As Goeteeris' report shows, even distinguished travellers could meet with really bad accidents. As far as boat traffic on the rivers was concerned it is apparent from the source material that a sharp distinction must be made on the one hand between journeys on lesser, fast-flowing rivers - or the upper reaches of the great rivers - and on the other hand journeys on the middle and lower sections of great rivers. The development of boats and ships since the Viking period is a significant and complicated question, which we will not discuss here. It is evident that new and larger types of boats had come into existence for journeys on the larger rivers, but these, as far as one can judge, represent in the first place greater cargo carrying capability rather than an increase in speed.

As far as long distances on the large wide rivers like the Volga are concerned the three expeditions from Moscow to Astrakhan demonstrate an almost total congruence in terms of time. Both Olearius and Jenkinson covered some 30 km per day on their journeys between Moscow and the Caspian Sea. It is interesting that Jenkinson's upstream journey was just as quick - or slow - as his downstream journey. This can partly be explained by the fact that he made a couple of stops during the journey out, and partly by the fact that his ship on the upstream journey could be warped and towed when necessary by large numbers of workmen.



Southam's journal describes a long-distance expedition using smaller, faster-flowing rivers, with a number of enforced landward transports using small boats. Southam and his colleague, Sparke, covered on their journey from the White Sea to Novgorod some 33 km per 24 hours. Even if they had goods with them they travelled comparatively light. They were a small party, did long journeys by day, and usually spent the nights out in the open. It is this kind of journey which is most comparable with the experimental "Viking journeys" undertaken in recent years in Russia, where the average daily stages were of something in the same order: 26 km for the Aifur expedition, for instance (Edberg 1999a). Waxell's spectacular exploitation of the River Urak for transports was a unique event, as the writer himself emphasises; and this experience can scarcely be compared with Southam and Sparke's expedition. It is also important to stress that all the travel accounts in their own ways give a tangible picture of the very different conditions which one and the same river or travel route can offer, depending on factors which cannot, with any certainty, be foreseen, such as weather, water levels, currents, bandits, war, troubled times, etc. Such factors emphasise that journeys are by no means only a matter of technicalities. They are, in the first place, social projects, and components of a game with many changing rules.

How good, then, are the quoted sources? They are all contemporary, independent of, but of course not free from, tendentiousness, since they reflect the political, economic, cultural and religious conditions and prejudices of their time. Some of the writers can also be assumed to have had expressly conscious aims. One assumption of what such a critical analysis can provide is to be found in the following assessment of Palmquist's Russian Sketches (Tarkiainen 1987):

"One should thus, despite the factual carefulness and high degree of artistry characteristic of Palmquist's work, make the judgement that this illustrated work

gave those who looked at and read it a picture of a primitive, sometimes even laughable, neighbouring country. The large and carefully-drawn road maps of North-western Russia which once belonged to the work, and challenge the young king to win his laurels in the East, are evidence of the spirit in which Erik Palmquist completed the work for which he was commissioned."

Other source-critical aspects are, however, in this actual context more important. The writers are upper-class people, diplomats, merchants or officers. They have a good deal of cash at their disposal and also servants and other employees. They are often also provided with lodgings, provisions and fodder, and even with escorts, by the authorities - by the czar himself, the Russian post and staging authority, the Swedish military administration in the Baltic provinces, or the monasteries. They are never abandoned to their own resources in an unknown land. Information on travelling conditions and the representativeness of travelling times and their comparative potential should therefore, in the light of this special background, be handled with caution. The day stages demonstrate a marked variation, which is explained by the distinctive conditions experienced by the different travellers and the factors discussed above (Table 1).

It would, nevertheless, appear to be possible to set up a definite framework on which to peg a generalised discussion. The distance covered in 24 hours on the river journeys was often 30-35 km, while journeys by horse and wagon during day stages were as a rule 20-45 km. On sledge journeys in winter, stages were usually 30-50 km, though both much shorter and much longer stages are also recorded.

The Russian researcher, Miklyayev has questioned whether, in the light of the low water level in the rivers of North-western Russia during the Viking period, it really would have been possible to travel by boat from the Novgorod area over the watershed to the Dnieper, as older research has assumed. He has

put forward the idea of winter journeys as a credible alternative for the traffic in the northern part of the "Road from the Varangians to the Greeks", so well known from the Russian Primary Chronicle. Miklyayev has drawn the conclusion, referring specifically to Westerners' journeys in historic times that the day stages for journeys under winter conditions would as a rule have been between 40 and 80 km.

Miklyayev has used this information in relation to conditions before the period of roads and post stations, and sketched out the probable extension of the winter route between Novgorod and Gnezdovo/Smolensk: from Kuritsko over Lake Ilmen to Staraya Russa, on via Kolomno, Kholm, Troitse, Khlavitsa, Dedkovichy, Cherevuchi, Krezny, Gorodischche/Sereteye, and Kholm/Polovya, and finally along the Kasplya. This route is approx. 535 km and in wintertime might have been covered in something between 7 and 14 days. From Gnezdovo the winter route would have gone, in line with Miklyayev's ideas, along the Sozh, with a crossing to Desna and on to Chernigov. From there one would have continued by boat to Kiev after the break-up of the ice (Miklyayev 1992) 4)

Miklyayev identifies himself elegantly, in this hypothetical argument, with the Byzantine tenth-century Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos' well-known account of the Rus' trading expeditions along the Dnieper.

Miklyayev's analysis can, of course, be discussed in the light of the source-critical aspects commented on earlier. But irrespective of this it has a pronounced merit in the fact that it draws attention to the functional and cognitive totality formed by rivers and river valleys, namely as travel routes in and through the landscape.

Following a river does not always mean the same as travelling by boat on a river, but the journey can just as well take place by horse along the river, or by sledge on the ice if the river is frozen up, or on

prepared winter roads alongside the river. Rivers and river valleys may also be seen as bearers of, and orientation indicators for, human ideas and communications. The route as phenomenon and concept can therefore be said to manifest disintegration of the antagonism existing between man and terrain, of which journeys by their very nature consist. But rivers and river valleys are clearly not the only routes for journeys. Several of the travellers quoted are just as keen to follow routes overland, both those of the more primitive kind, as with Goeteeris' troublesome journey from Narva to Novgorod, and the more frequented ones, such as the main road between Novgorod and Moscow. How old routes of this kind are cannot be decided just like that, but one might say the same of river routes. It can, meanwhile, be assumed that long-distance journeys during prehistoric times were generally speaking less common and that this especially applied to sparsely-populated areas like the Eurasian taiga belt, where the travel-route system should be seen as a product of the colonisation process.

## Notes

- 1) Lodia = the term for different types of flat-bottomed (usually) ships for coastal and river traffic. Troika = a three-in-hand (driven by three horses).
- 2) A Swedish version of this paper was published in R. Edberg: Färder i Österled. Experiment, myter, källor och analogier. Stockholm Marine Archaeology Reports, 2. Stockholm 2002.
- 3) 1 verst = app 1.07 km. 1 German mile = app 7.5 km. (information varies somewhat in older literature. Goeteeris calculates, for example, 1 German mile = 5 versts).
- 4) Miklyayev refers to the work Rossiya XV-XVII vekov glazami inostrancev, Leningrad 1986.

**Table 1.**

Travels by riverboat

Kholmogory-Vologda 40 (Jenkinson)  
Staraya Ladoga-Novgorod 35 (Olearius)  
Kholmogory-Novgorod 33 (Southam & Sparke)  
Moscow-Astrakhan 30 (Jenkinson)  
Astrakhan-Moscow 30 (Jenkinson)  
Moscow-Astrakhan 29 (Olearius)

Travel by land (when free of snow and ice)

Narva-Nyen 47 (Olearius)  
Reval-Narva 44 (Goeteeris)  
Novgorod-Moscow 37 (Olearius)  
Narva-Novgorod 17 (Goeteeris)

Winter journeys by sledge

Vologda-Moscow 77 (Jenkinson)  
Novgorod-Narva 48 (Goeteeris)  
Glebova-Viborg 47 (van Wouw)  
Novgorod-Moscow 44 (Goeteeris)  
Narva-Reval 44 (Goeteeris)  
Riga-Dorpat 28 (Olearius)  
Dorpat-Narva 31 (Olearius)  
Novgorod-Milagona 15 (Goeteeris)

Table 1. Some recorded distances for travels in Russia using different modes of transport, in km per 24 hours.

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